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# BUSINESS

The Source

Section D

Sunday, November 5, 2006



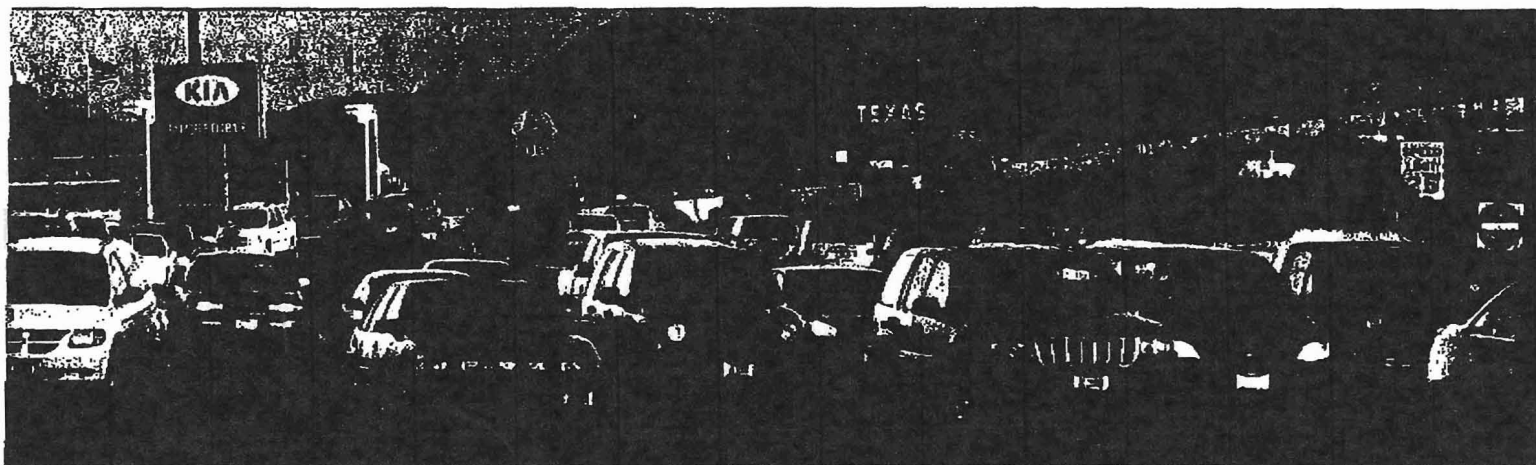
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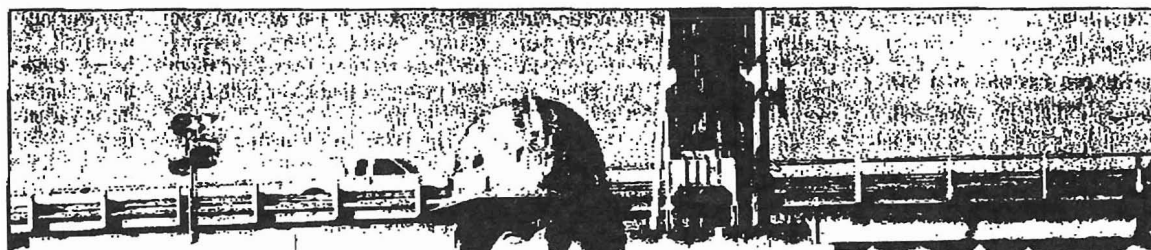
DEBTOR'S EXHIBIT 9



Traffic bunches up at King Avenue West and 20th Street West Tuesday afternoon.

# GROWING PAINS

## Bridge reconstruction project around King Avenue West causing some headaches



Story By JAN FALSTAD  
Photos By BOB ZELLAR  
Of The Gazette Staff

One car dealer and a couple of  
restaurant managers around the  
King Avenue West interchange say  
business is down because of the \$60  
million project to rebuild four  
bridges and add a third traffic lane.

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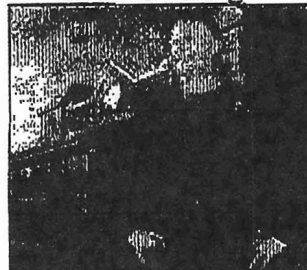
☐ print ☐ e-mail ☐ comments(0) \*\*\* rate [A](#) enlarge type [A](#) reduce type**Bridge reconstruction project around King Avenue West causing some headaches****By JAN FALSTAD**  
**Of The Gazette Staff**

One car dealer and a couple of restaurant managers around the King Avenue West interchange say business is down because of the \$16 million project to rebuild four bridges and add a third traffic lane.

And, some of the businessmen are quite vocal about the loss of sales and what they see as a convoluted traffic pattern.

But the balance of them say the inconveniences aren't as bad as expected and having an extra lane in each direction and new bridges will be well worth it in the long term.

Fuddrucker's general manager and part owner Dave Binstock said any sales losses have been minor and aren't necessarily related to the bridge work.

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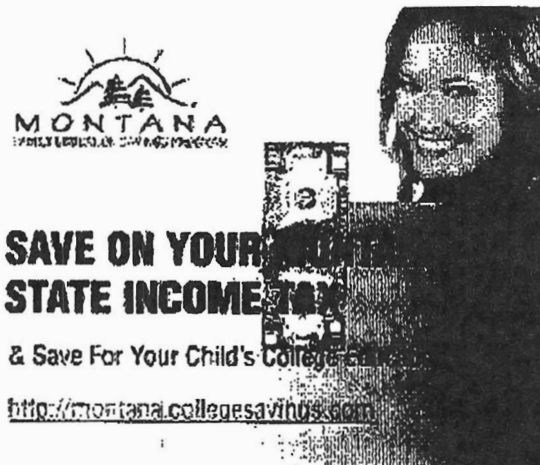
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"We've been slower in the last few weeks," he said. "You can sit and moan about it all you want, but it still benefits us all when it's done."

The Montana Department of Transportation has hired Sletten Construction of Great Falls to widen four bridges dating back to 1964 from two lanes to three. Work started June 16 and will run through next October.

Phase 2, which is under way, involves rebuilding and widening the southbound lanes of the bridge spanning old Laurel Road and the bridge crossing the Montana Rail Link tracks.

Next March, Sletten Construction will reroute traffic again to the completed southbound lanes and start rebuilding the northbound ones.

"I see several traffic efficiency improvements with this project, but the purpose of it was bridge replacement," said Montana DOT district administrator Bruce Barrett.

## Turn, turn, turn

During construction, drivers heading down King Avenue toward the Holiday Inn Grand Montana cannot turn left onto King Avenue West when it curves before the bridges. That is one of the biggest problems cited by business owners.

Incredible Auto Sales LLC Chief Executive and President Nick Gutierrez said last month that road construction has cut traffic to his Kia dealership by up to 80 percent.

This was one reason Gutierrez cited for filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection for his car dealership at 1832 King Ave. W.

- Accident kills sheriff's deputy  
(97 today, 137 total)
- Poll: Burns, Tester in dead heat  
(62 today, 86 total)
- Letter: Bush protesters near Meira embarrass Billings  
(40 today, 60 total)
- Rollover kills sheriff's deputy  
(28 today, 155 total)
- Letter: Political invocation contradicts Constitution  
(22 today, 31 total)

Stories that have received the most comments in the last 24 hours.

## readers' favorite stories

- 'He was a sailor at heart': Absarokee man killed in Iraq recalled with fondness  
★★★★★ (23 ratings)
- City Lights: Homeless man's death diminishes us  
★★★★★ (26 ratings)
- Letter: Bush policy on Iraq destroying our country

"If you can't make a left turn, you're going to go somewhere else," Gutierrez said. "People take the path of least resistance."

Across the street at Rimrock Auto Group, however, people were smiling.

"It's been a good month," said general manager Emmitt Gunn. "With growth comes construction and growth is good for everyone."

SpringHill Suites by Marriott at 1818 King Ave. W., expected a lot of impact from the loss of the left turn and customer traffic.

"We thought our business would come to a halt, but most of the week, we're booked," said assistant general manager Diane Seder.

Access to King Avenue from the old Laurel Road can mean waits of up to 15 minutes, according to LaDonna Miller, who works at Conlin's Furniture.

"Sometimes the ramp is backed up clear up to the freeway," said LaDonna Miller. "Then you have another light and that's booked up, too."

She also said there is a slight danger to the concrete barriers dividing the narrow lanes, especially at night when the area is poorly lit.

## Driving for dining

Restaurants seem to be the most affected.

Texas Roadhouse and HuHot Mongolian Grill are tucked back off of King Avenue West and both are feeling the pinch.

Texas Roadhouse general manager John Socha said sales are off.

"It'll be great when it is finished, but we're just concerned about the hassle," Socha said.

At HuHot, the customer count is down about 15 percent to 20 percent, according to Steve Halloran, one of the five owners.

"That is probably travelers who don't know the local

★★★★ (30 ratings)

- **Letter: Political invocation contradicts Constitution**

★★★★ (69 ratings)

- **Accident kills sheriff's deputy**

★★★★ (85 ratings)

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more business headlines

- **Bridge reconstruction project around King Avenue West causing some headaches Have You Heard?: Arizona man makes big bid for property Chili pepper magnate keeps heat turned up 'Workplace Attention Deficit Disorder' found to be contagious Entrepreneurs look to franchises to get start in business Bridger Steel builds on permanent site in West End**
- **Workers put value on balance**
- **State 4-H honors**

routes," he said.

Other business owners on this street said they aren't affected. Backdoor Quilt Shoppe and Stone Mountain Carpet Outlet are destination stores.

"We're having the best October ever and our business this year is up 20 percent," said Jim Moreland, who manages Stone Mountain at 710 Carbon St.

The Montana DOT is placing signs along South 20th Street West by the Conoco and Holiday gas stations to direct travelers over to King Avenue West. The signs will list half a dozen business names and show drivers how to take South 20th to Lampman Drive, hang a right and another right on Carbon Street - the back over to these businesses.

"Signs can't help but do anything but clarify and instruct the traffic," Halloran said.

### The mildly miffed

Area hotel and motel managers said business hasn't fallen off as expected, probably because they are destination stops.

Aaron Rumble, general manager of the C'Mon Inn on Overland Avenue, said that half a dozen customers complained about the noise when road work started last summer. Out-of-town guests get confused at all the orange traffic signs and need more directions than usual, he said, and some guests are confused about how to drive to dinner.

"If I were a guest at my hotel and you had to make 40 turns to get to a restaurant, I'd do what was easy to eat," Rumble said.

Today, drivers heading down King Avenue West toward the Holiday Inn must turn right at the Outback Steak House. When construction is complete, that third lane will continue on over the bridges and help move traffic, Barrett said.

### The other lost left turn

Drivers heading west on the old Laurel Road who want to go left on King Avenue toward the Billings Hotel or Ramada must turn right.

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- **Berkshire's Profit Up Nearly Fivefold**
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- **Several Carriers Boost Fares by \$10 RT**
- **Starbucks Loses Laptops With Worker Data**
- Market Watch**

The forced right turn has given rise to frequent U-turns at King and South 20th Street West from drivers wanting to head back over the bridges to the Holiday Inn area.

Some drivers make the Yellowstone Bank parking lot turnaround land.

"It gets a little irritating sometimes when they do a U-turn, some will drive up on the grass," said Yellowstone Bank President Jay Jensen. "So we put a big rock out there to prevent that."

At 5 p.m. when Wells Fargo Loan Processing Center employees and other area workers stream home, traffic backs up on Overland past the bank's entrance, Jensen said, creating a customer service issue. Some employees drive out to the Shiloh Road exchange to avoid getting stuck in rush-hour traffic.

## South Frontage Road folks

Cracker Barrel general manager Michael Maurina said people seem to be traveling a little later in the fall this year, but he can't attribute any loss of business to the bridge construction. In fact, it may be steering a few customers his way, he said.

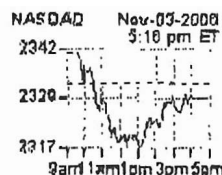
"Some (drivers) coming from the west going east see the construction and they don't go over the bridge," he said.

The Southern Empire Emporium Restaurant, Lounge & Casino at 1212 Muldowney Lane isn't affected much, according to owner Ron Lund, except for a longer commute from his other businesses.

"Maybe it takes me a little longer, but I'm not pressed for time," Lund said. "I think they're doing a very good job of getting the traffic moving."

Part of the contract DOT signed with Sletten Construction requires the company to hold community meetings to explain the project and answer questions. One meeting was held in June before work began, and a second occurred last month and the communication was welcomed by most business owners.

However, some business executives working on the Holiday Inn side of I-90 are complaining about the traffic hang-ups, but are reluctant to talk publicly.



Index	Last Trade	Change
NASDAQ	2330.70	-3.23
S&P 500	1364.30	-3.04
Russ 2000	752.73	2.00
AMEX	1874.30	24.11
NYSE	8718.75	-5.92
30 YR BOND	48.11	0.07

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One owner said he eliminated the graveyard shift due to a lack of customers who can't turn left.

In addition to widening and rebuilding the bridges, the DOT should have built an underpass or overpass for local drivers who want to access local streets like Midland Road or the South Frontage Road, without hopping on the interstate, he said.

"They're not taking care of any of the people from downtown Billings trying to get here except if they want to zigzag through the South Side past a school zone and by Hanser's Automotive," he said. "The whole thing is so goofy."

However, Barrett said the left turns will be restored when construction ends, adding that the department has limited funding.

"King Avenue consumed something like half of our bridge replacement fund for the state for one year," Barrett said.

### **Oh yeah? Look at this**

Widespread travel gives some Montanans a different perspective on road construction.

While most people said they expected the King Avenue bridge delays to be worse than they are, at least three businessmen completely shrugged off the delays.

Jack Crumbaker, store manager for Conlin's Furniture at 739 S. 20th St. W., said he wasn't hearing any customers complain about traffic snarls and, personally, this project doesn't hit his radar screen.

"There has never been a traffic problem in Billings," Crumbaker said, adding that he lived in traffic-clogged Houston for several years.

Scott Van Doren, who works at the Ramada Limited at 1345 Muldowney Lane and owns Coffee Break Massages, pointed to Denver's successful \$1.67 billion T-Rex project. Starting in 2001, contractors rebuilt 17 miles of Colorado freeway, including eight interchanges and 18 bridges, and extended the light-rail system 19 miles.

"Look what they did in Denver with I-25?" he said. "You just have to deal with it."

At the neighboring Billings Hotel & Convention Center, owners Ron and Jeff Muri also said their bookings are fine.

However, Ron Muri said that he has traveled the country and called the King Avenue interchange "hodgepodge building." This Montana interchange compares unfavorably with the worst in the nation, Muri said, including Philadelphia's Schuylkill Expressway which drivers call the "Sure-Kill Expressway" or the "Sure-Kill Distressway."

"Stoplights under bridges. Stoplights on top of bridges. Traffic crossing in front of each other," he said. "It is the most complicated one I've ever been on."

*- Jan Falstad can be contacted at (406) 657-1306 or at [jfalstad@billingsgazette.com](mailto:jfalstad@billingsgazette.com)*

**Editor's note:** For more information, go to: [www.slettenbridge.com](http://www.slettenbridge.com)


Published on Sunday, November 05, 2006.  
Last modified on 11/4/2006 at 11:58 pm

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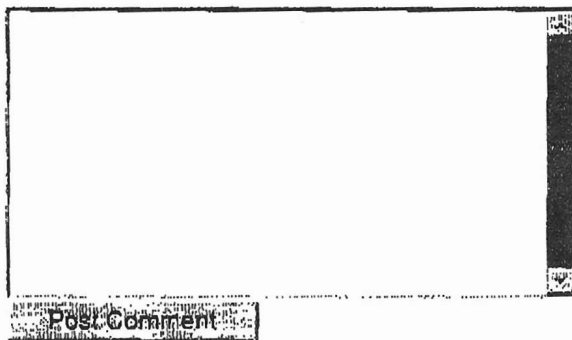
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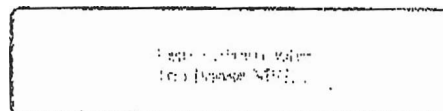
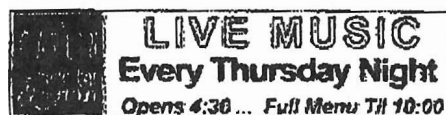
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